

IT'S ALL ABOUT ORGANIZING

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The perfect is all too often the enemy of the good. This is what I was thinking when I read Corey Dolgon and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's plenary addresses from the 2008 AHS meetings. To one degree or another, the speeches represent views of social change activism. On the one hand, you have a reflection on an organizing experience in which an academic actually acknowledges the hard work of those supporting an electoral campaign with a positive result - the good; on the other hand, you have an intellectual who too easily writes off those doing the flawed work of making our democracy work on the ground. In this case, the campaign was for a far more thoughtful, less harmful US leader than we had over the last decade. As we learned over the last decade, contrary to Ralph Nader's argument from 2000, it can be very dangerous to have a corporate shill leading the country. Anti-humanist judges are appointed; the labor movement loses support under a weak National Labor Relations Board. Housing and Urban Development programs do less to support community needs. The CDC allows ideology to trump science in tracking disease. Global gag rules interfere with effective public policies (Kaplan, 2005). Corporate interests are supported at the expense of everything else. Wars get started on a whim. And discourse shifts away from the needs of people. Both Dolgon and Bonilla-Silva are correct to point to the importance of social movements as opposed to electoral campaigns. I have never been one to put much time into electoral politics. But as a person who supports the work of a wide range of social movements and has seen First Amendment protections for freedom of assembly erode over the last decade, I am acutely aware of how much less activists get beaten up by federal, state, or city authorities when the Democrats are in charge.

Bonilla-Silva's perspective on the Obama election fits into a familiar pattern. Despite his sometimes more "radical than thou" tone, Bonilla-Silva is persuasive in noting Obama's shortcomings. Still, the address feels like the kind of email one writes in a flurry but is better off not sending. In the year since Obama's election, the anti-imperialist left has attempted to impose a "one-size-fits-all" analysis of the Obama moment, asserting that President is no different than any of the other capitalist imperialists. We all know that corporate capitalism is going to do just fine under Obama. The problem is our current winner takes all system fails to offer proportional representation (Powell Jr, 2000). Electorally speaking, Obama is about as good as we are going to get.

Few thoughtful people ever felt Obama would be a panacea as Bonilla-Silva implies. "[H]is campaign was never the source of freedom dreams to inspire a new mass movement for social justice," argues Dolgon. I reconciled myself to the long letdown for months before the election. As a harm reductionist, I'd rather have the less harm of Obama than the McCain crowd in power. I never thought Obama would be the solution to corporate globalization, inequality, entrenched institutional racism, and so on. Few of us thought Obama would solve these things. These are long term problems we all have to deal with, in our communities. But it makes it easier to deal with local things when doors to the federal government are a little more open than they were in the last decade. We get beaten up a little less. Things get better when people see a light. Examples from Civil Rights to the Global Justice Movement support this argument. Such moments offer a shift in social discourses which open the door for social change. "[T]he recent turn towards public sociology ought to be mostly welcomed and celebrated by those of us in the Association for Humanist Sociology," argues Dolgon. "[T]his shift results in a greater support for connecting our scholarly work as researchers, writers, and teachers to civic engagement and activism." Some things (leaders, policies, etc.) are better than other things, even if they are not the best things.

Bonilla-Silva condemns the Obama campaign because it was not backed by a movement. Yet most of the activists I know supported Obama. Bonilla-Silva fails to acknowledge the degree to which the organizers and advocates of the kinds of movements he supports mostly worked or at least supported Obama's presidential bid. There may be a reason for Bonilla-Silva's blindside on this issue. A few years ago, David Graeber (2003) made a useful point when talking about academics and activism.

I think we're at a historical moment when the role of academic intellectuals is more than anything else to shut up and start learning things. First thing people need to do is to get involved in actual social movements and to start to think about the implications of new forms of practice that are cropping up. I think that in a lot of ways the activists in practice are way ahead of the intellectuals right now. We're caught in this weird historical juncture. I think what happened, especially in the seventies, is that so much political activity was rooted in campuses and so huge percentages of academics thought of themselves as political radicals, as leaders of some sort of active political movements. Those movements have largely faded away. There are certain exceptions like feminism. We end up in this weird situation where most academics are writing these things that sound like position papers for vast social movements that don't actually exist. It's entirely in their heads. And it's the worst kind, this weird sort of crypto-sectarian debate where

tiny differences are fetishized into huge moral oppositions—you're a bad person if you get it wrong. It's very, very ridiculous. (Shukaitis, 2003, p. 71).

Bonilla-Silva's take on the Obama campaign reads like one of those position papers for a movement which does not exist, all while blowing ideological and tactical differences out of proportion. Certainly, few movements are without flaws. Despite this, many intellectuals from Cornell West to Stanley Aronowitz to many members of AHS both support and strive to make them better. This where I tend to think energy is better spent.

My question for Bonilla-Silva is this: Which movement would you like to have been behind Obama? Most every movement person I know, from anti-consumer to AIDS to global justice, supported the Obama campaign, many volunteering as Dolgon describes. Grassroots activists organized to bring countless new participants into the process. In the previous two election cycles the left was split over whether to support Kerry or Gore. And pervasive cynicism demobilized masses of the poor, of people of color. I remember canvassing in Harlem for a civil libertarian running for New York's office of public advocate in 2005. My job was to inform people about the voting place and talk up our candidate. I vividly remember asking one woman if she had gotten to the polls yet. With visceral anger, she replied, "I don't vote!" I had heard any number of brush-off lines that day. But her insistence seemed to communicate a point that no one was listening to her interests so voting was futile. This is where movements need to step in. They need to help people connect their desires with a mechanism for a program which just might help some of these dreams come to fruition.

Really it is the role of social movements to push governments to respond to their heat. Roosevelt talked about this, "You've convinced me. Now go out and make me do it." he challenged activists (quoted in Drier, 2009). Nixon passed the country's most widespread environmental laws as result of pressure from environmental groups. For many, Obama's single greatest mistake is his failure to connect his government with the organizing which got him there in the first place.

The night of the election in November 2008, people clogged the streets of New York City. It was like a carnival in Harlem. Unlike the deaths of Michael Jackson or James Brown or the acquittal of the NYPD officers who shot unarmed Amadou Diallo, this was not a funeral or another dispiriting moment, but a reason to give democracy a second look. After the election, one friend from organizing circles who had helped canvas for Obama, ruminated about the way the election seemed to offer hope in urban America. And what is wrong with a little hope? "You gotta give em hope," Harvey Milk charged in the 1970's.

Another activist friend remembered Rosa Parks and her efforts. To have a black president five decades later was a culmination of decades of organizing.

For my students, largely first generation immigrants and people of color at City University of New York, the Obama phenomena suggests breakthroughs are possible. It leads them away from the urban nihilism Cornel West describes in *Race Matters*, towards an acknowledgement that organizing actually matters and sometimes even succeeds. This is very important. The students in my community organizing class at CUNY spent the Fall of 2008 reflecting on the interplay between social movements, the election, and their lives. Throughout the weeks before the November 4th presidential election, community organizing was all over the news. Already we had witnessed a primary battle between an African American and a Caucasian woman, both of whom campaigned on their experience as organizers. By August, New York's former Mayor and Governor as well as the vice presidential nominee ridiculed Barack Obama's community organizing experience during the Republican National Convention. "[Obama] was a community organizer. What in God's name is a community organizer?," George Pataki observed. "He worked as a community organizer. What? Maybe this is the first problem on the résumé," Giuliani noted. Accepting her nomination, Sarah Palin declared, "I guess a small-town mayor is sort of like a 'community organizer,' except that you have actual responsibilities."

Throughout the semester, I asked the students in my community organizing class to reflect on the election. We watched films of members of the civil rights movement. Contrasting the image of a multi-ethnic candidate for the presidency with images of African Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and Indians using non-violent tactics to speak out for their rights, students reflected on the present election cycle with an eye on its historic meanings and significance. Many reflected on their ability to vote when only five decades prior African Americans and their allies in the Civil Rights Movement literally risked their lives for their right to participate in the democratic experience. The day after the election some told stories about their first time voting. Standing in line to vote, one student ruminated about black people who did not have the opportunity to vote because the color of their skin and the struggles they endured while fighting for equality. Waiting on line never felt so good, she mused, acutely aware that this was part of what African Americans fought for during the Civil Rights Movement. She praised these leaders as she recognized her voice could be heard. Others in the class suggested their view of government changed dramatically with Obama's election. They suggested that maybe just maybe, democracy was opening up to incorporate their perspectives. "The next might be a Latina" another suggested. She argued that the election would have a useful effect, even if it simply translated into a greater acceptance of ethnic diversity.

Reflecting on Governor Pataki and Mayor Giuliani's questions, "What in God's name is a community organizer?," many have noted that community organizers are the ones who helped win the election. In many ways, the election helped open up the doors to a new cohort doing its part to incorporate its perspective into our ever evolving democratic story. Yet, to get there communities must continue to organize.

Moving forward, it is important to note that Democrats are far more mutable to public pressure. "The problem is the Bush regime isn't vulnerable to these people [activists]," Frances Fox Piven explained in an interview before the election (see Shepard, 2008). "They can't do anything to the Bush Administration or Republican Congress. So we really will do better when the Democrats take over. Not because they really are on our side but because they really are vulnerable to some of the people on our side." Afterall, "A progressive president needs a mobilized base," Piven (2010) elaborated in another essay co-authored with Lorrie C. Minnite after the election.

An AIDS demonstration in July offered a telling example of just this sort of phenomena. July 9, 2009, AIDS activists organized a civil disobedience action in which they locked themselves down at the capital rotunda. Twenty-six activists were arrested carrying a banner declaring: "CONGRESS: HOUSING SAVES LIVES, CLEAN NEEDLES WORK, FIGHT GLOBAL AIDS" (see Associated Press, 2009). The following day, "a House subcommittee that deals with health funding took an important step to lift the federal ban on funding syringe exchange!" wrote Jennifer Flynn (2009) of the Healthgap Global Access Project. "AIDS activists have been working for 20 years to allow federal dollars to go to these lifesaving programs."

"After 20 years of work, this historic vote finally signals that the United States now fully accepts the evidence of eight federal studies that syringe exchange reduces the incidence of HIV/AIDS and does not increase substance abuse," said Rebecca Haag, AIDS Action's Executive Director, adding that she hoped the change in policy would send a signal to the world that syringe exchange was an important part of comprehensive HIV/AIDS and viral hepatitis prevention policies. If ever there was a clear example of the utility of the use of direct action to move a policy agenda, this action was it (see Pelofsky, 2009).

Here, one sees a slow shift toward an acknowledgement of a more diverse experience of US life. On December 9th, the Supreme Court reported Justice Sotomayor's opinion in the case, *Mohawk Industries v. Carpenter*, No. 08-678, marked the first use of the term "undocumented immigrant," according to a legal database. The term "illegal immigrant" has appeared in a dozen decisions," (Liptak, 2009). Such moments mark a shift in social discourse.

From this vantage point, the most important lesson of the last election was it resulted from one set of organizing efforts, in order to support further organizing efforts. Dolgon and Bonilla-Silva agree we need more of this sort of work and play of organizing such movements. “[D]o all these things CREATIVELY—yes we can use humor, yes we can be postmodern in style,” Bonilla-Silva concludes. Few could disagree. After all, what this is really about is organizing, not just to get people elected, but to help build communities and create models of programs and policies which offer smarter solutions on the ground. This work is already happening (Shepard, 2009). Organizing is a complex phenomenon as many elements are in play. Sure, one hopes to achieve a particular goal—policy, political decision, etc., but total victories are often elusive or hard to recognize. There are other elements, however, in a campaign for change. These include social and cultural changes, as well as most importantly, the communities which take shape throughout the process. One of my favorite moments during the election was when my friends and I organized a stoop sale, in which people sold a pair of shoes here, an old DVD there to raise money for the campaign. In doing so, we better connected with ourselves and our communities. That was the important part.

“As was true in the brief stories I opened with, and the countless others that I have heard from friends and colleagues around the nation, the hope came from the walking and talking and acting with others who also wanted change,” Dolgon concludes. “A sense of hope arose out of the conversations and commitment, the camaraderie and community that developed as people canvassed together, stood together, watched together, spoke together, and in concert created a new sense of what America might look like.” This was a conversation about, “what America might mean,” and a conversation that wouldn’t have taken place without the organizing. And it was also a conversation about how academics support movements for change. “After decades of identity politics and postmodernism and post-feminism and post-Marxism, it seems that cutting edge progressive and radical scholars are rediscovering the importance of mass movements and realizing the revolution will not be theorized,” argues Dolgon. “Without movement organizing and real connections to political struggle our public intellectualism may be moot.” There are always limitations, given real life restrictions, bills to pay, etc. Yet, Dolgon suggests academics can support organizing efforts by collaborating with movements rather than asserting themselves as intellectual leaders. “[T]he real fuel for freedom dreams that comes from sociologists working in concert with neighborhoods and activists around the world. This is the fuel that fans the flames of discontent,” Dolgon concludes. It’s all about organizing.

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